

Jehovah's Witnesses in prison as of 1 January

HRWF (01.01.2019) - As of 1 January 2019, authorities had placed 25 Witnesses in pretrial detention and 24 under house arrest, and 38 are not allowed to leave the area where they live. All have been charged with organizing, participating in, or financing the activity of an "extremist" organization. In July, officials in Omsk placed the first female Witness in pretrial detention, setting a disturbing precedent.

Officials attempt to justify their actions by citing the April 2017 ban on the Witnesses' legal entities and misapplying Article 282 of the Criminal Code. In reality, they are prosecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for peaceful worship. If convicted, some of those who have been arrested face prison terms of up to ten years.

Since February 2018, law enforcement officers have followed a general pattern when arresting and detaining Jehovah's Witnesses. Heavily armed police forcibly enter Witnesses' homes, often pointing guns at the heads of the residents—including children and the elderly—and forcing them to the floor. While officers search the premises, they confiscate personal belongings and take some Witnesses into custody for further interrogation. Investigators initiate criminal charges against selected Witnesses for alleged extremist activity and petition the courts to order their pretrial detention. Once the Witnesses are jailed, prosecutors petition the courts to extend the pretrial detentions, and the courts typically grant their requests.